

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
**ISSN-2321-7065**

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

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*Both: 'Docile' Intersexed Bodies*

**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the underlying dimensions of power that infiltrate the bodies and lives of intersex persons primarily through unnecessary and debilitating medical and surgical interventions that violate their bodily integrity and personal autonomy. The paper focuses on the 2005 Canadian-Peruvian drama film *Both* directed by Lisset Barcellos which poignantly examines the mental, physical, familial and emotional trauma associated with being born as an intersexed person. The film's plot is based on true lived intersex experiences and stories. The thrust of this paper is to examine how intersex people have been victims of biopower which Michel Foucault defines as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations". It investigates how the bodies and identities of intersexed human beings have been undermined by medical institutions in irrevocable ways. It also seeks to highlight how this section of humanity has been blatantly effaced from public knowledge by subduing and nullifying the truth of their existence.

**Keywords:** Intersex, *Both*, Michel Foucault, Biopower, Docile bodies

"We still insist that there be no hermaphrodites, lest they grow and multiply"

Human beings have always exhibited a natural attraction and adherence for consistency and familiar patterns. We show a tendency to applaud the majority and sideline the minorities. We are comfortable in interpreting the world in terms of binaries and appreciate as well as strive to achieve 'normality'. Anything or anyone who transgresses the socially stipulated normative boundaries are inevitably met with repressive measures on varying scales according to the intensity of the challenge they pose on cultural expectations. It is risky and difficult for anyone to raise a firm and loud voice of opposition against the instruments of repressive power that operate the society.

This is the fundamental cause for the violence and hostility that has been faced by the LGBTIQ category over the ages. The society has always felt threatened by the existence of human beings that they are unable to easily reconcile with. Nevertheless, over the recent years a comparatively positive and accommodative space has been more or less negotiated across places and cultures for the equality and rights of individuals who have non conformative gender identities and sexual orientations. But amidst the plethora of protests, discussions, enquiries and sensitization attempts, there is a category that has been ignored and sidelined. Indeed, the intersex category is still partially hidden from the public conscience behind a veil of silence, secrecy and stigma. The mainstream society is largely unaware of the realities pertaining to this most marginalized group of human beings.

*Both* is a 2005 US Canadian-Peruvian drama film directed by Lisset Barcellos that explores issues surrounding intersexuality which doctors continue to erase any evidence of, using non-consensual invasive surgery and hormonal interventions. The story is an empathetic and sensitive illustration of the issues that individuals and families encounter when an intersex child is born. *Both* deals with themes of lies, duplicity and misinformation that many intersex people have experienced in their own lives. It acknowledges true intersex experiences and is not afraid to depict them. The film looks at how family, medics and the

wider society have denied bodily integrity and personal autonomy to anyone born intersex and the extremes that people are known to go to, all in the name of supposedly benefitting those born intersex. *Both* is partly based on the life experiences of the director Lisset Barcellos, who stated “I made my film so I don’t have to talk about my own experiences”, she also said that she “wanted to capture what an intersex person goes through when they find out about the deception they have lived with”.

The film explores the ramifications of medical surgical intervention as an accepted strategy to ‘correct’ or cure intersex individuals. The lead character of the movie is the bisexual stunt artist Rebecca Duarte who is a native of Peru. She lives in the US and constantly puts her life at risk in the course of her job. She lives her life bearing the deep agony of not being able to remember her younger brother Pedro who had passed away due to some kind of illness when he was just three. Rebecca had retained no memory of him and had been told by her parents that all their childhood photo albums had been destroyed in a fire years ago in Peru. The drama unfolds with Rebecca receiving an old photo album containing pictures of her parents and Pedro. The album is sent from Peru by Aunt Mica, Rebecca’s maternal grandmother’s sister. For unknown reasons, it triggers a deep discomfort in Rebecca’s mind regarding her past as a child. Coupled with this is Rebecca’s inability to achieve an orgasm in any manner possible (through masturbation or sex with both men and women).

The pivotal point in the movie comes when Rebecca sets out in search of her younger brother’s medical records and ends up finding out that the patient who had undergone surgery had never died. She makes the devastating discovery that in fact she herself had been the patient named Pedro Duarte. She had been born as an intersex child and was subjected to a sex reassignment surgery as a three year old. Her family had relocated from Peru to the US in order to allow her identity as a female to develop in a fresh environment. This discovery

immerses Rebecca into total disillusionment and trauma. It tears apart the artifices of Rebecca's childhood and adulthood.

Rebecca's plight to deal with the truth of her own body is not to be analysed as merely a fictional event in a movie. Statistics reveal that a vast majority of intersex infants born across the globe are subjected to surgical interventions according to the whims and wishes of doctors. The intersex issue cannot be sufficiently addressed and acknowledged merely by treating it as a gender matter alone. It needs to be analysed with reference to medical ethics as well as psychological trauma.

Medical professionals recognize the Latin mantra *Primum, non nocere*, "First, do no harm" as the first principle of medicine. Yet, pediatric surgeons do harm when they surgically 'correct' the ambiguous genitalia of intersexed infants. For at least two intersex conditions - clitoromegaly (large clitoris) and micropenis (small penis), both the diagnosis of the condition and the ultimate result of the surgery are based on subjective notions of what doctors, parents, and society believe to be 'normal-looking' genitals. These practices fail to fulfill the promises of preserved erotic sensation, and above all of 'a normal life' made by the doctors recommending and performing them. Intersex bodies have been historically disciplined, subjugated and negated by medical institutions.

The French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault has defined 'biopower' as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations". Foucault focuses on how societal institutions have over the ages exerted control over the lives of the people by taking into account their births, physical health, behaviours, productivity etc. Through regulatory supervision over the population deployed by such institutions of power like hospitals, schools and the civil forces, the state asserts a power that is focused on the very bodies of the subjects. Such regulatory mechanisms are claimed to be imposed for the betterment of the population as well as to

maintain societal order and well being. But Foucault problematises these practices because they are all ultimately aimed at supervising, controlling and manipulating the basic biological features of human beings; moreover these practices are the veiled manifestations of the pervasive power of the state.

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explicates how the institutions of the state from the classical age onwards “discovered the body as object and target of power”. If in the early past, this power was exerted through torture, imprisonment and explicit force, in the contemporary age this power is manifested in multifarious invisible ways. The body is maintained, disciplined and manipulated through subtle coercion. Human bodies are thus managed to exist not as how they are but rather as how the State wishes them to be. The implications of this kind of discipline are profound and vast.

According to Michel Foucault, ‘docility’ joins the analysable body to the manipulable body. “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”. Although the example that Foucault himself had given for the docile bodies around us were those of soldiers, on closer examination it is evident that the sexual minorities in the contemporary society and specifically intersex persons are the real ones who are rendered ‘docile’ in the complete sense of the word. Their bodies are indeed subjected without their knowledge and transformed without their consent in order to pacify the heteronormative society’s queerphobia.

When Rebecca confronts the doctor who had operated on her as a child, she asks him “Why did you make me into a girl?”. The reply of the doctor is important in this context because it exemplifies accurately the general medical attitude towards intersex. He says that they didn’t exactly turn her into a girl but rather “just fixed a mistake”. He also delivers an absolutely patronising judgement and tells Rebecca that she was “always destined to be a woman” which was “the most appropriate gender... given the conditions”. He also further

tells her that he would like to examine her again. It is clear that the doctor has no empathy or compassion for the person who had been affected by his surgical intervention. Rebecca's body is being viewed here as separate from her identity.

The doctor's claim that Rebecca's biological condition had been a mistake that needed 'fixing' is a clear manifestation of the general medical attitude towards intersex. The mainstream heteronormative society has a deeply entrenched fear and disgust for anything or anyone that is deviant from the 'normal'. This queerphobia is institutionalized in hospitals. Who is the doctor to decide the appropriate gender of a three year old child? What authority do doctors have to cut and carve the genital organs of a child that cannot yet decide or talk for itself? In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault says:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes... Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile bodies'.

This docility is imposed forcibly on intersex people and many of them are left emotionally traumatised from the onset of puberty. In the movie, we see Rebecca struggling with the fact that she is unable to achieve an orgasm whatsoever. She is also troubled constantly with thoughts of her brother of whom she had no memory. When Rebecca finally confronts her mother about the elaborate web of lies that had been woven to keep Rebecca from discovering her biological past, her mother says in tears, "They told us that it would be the best thing for you. That your thing was too small for you to ever be a real man. Your father and I were so confused". This is to be understood as a clear instance of denying or nullifying a person's biological existence. In Foucault's words, "Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification". He also talks about how power restricts

sexual deviances through ‘the logic of censorship’ - “affirming that such a thing is not permitted, preventing it from being said, denying that it exists. Forms that are difficult to reconcile”.

During Rebecca’s confrontation with the doctor, he tells her the logic behind his decision to surgically remove her supposedly masculine parts: “Well there was testicular tissue, but there was also ovarian tissue present, and sufficiently developed. And we thought that there was a good possibility that you could have children” and Rebecca interrupts his explanation by saying “I don’t want to have children”. Here, we see the doctor viewing Rebecca’s body solely as a machine for reproduction, with no value other than its potential for procreation. Is not a person’s body his or her own property in its own right? It can be said that the act of surgical intervention by performing genital normalising surgery on intersex persons parallel Adolf Hitler’s mass annihilation of Jews in the name of ethnic cleansing. Both are in the name of self justified false notions of considering a particular group of human beings as inferior and dysfunctional. While one group was tortured in the name of their ethnicity, the other group is being blatantly denied their right to their own bodies and their right to equality because of their sexual ambiguity.

It is worth examining whether the blame for this sex change, identity swipe and consequent adulthood trauma should fall on Rebecca’s parents or rather the doctors who made them believe that Rebecca simply had to undergo the surgery as in a case of medical emergency to save the patient’s life. Her parents were not honestly made aware of the true aspects of her condition but were instead made insecure about their child with questions like how the public would receive a freak like her, whether she would be made fun of or even whether she would be hurt by others. So it was the fear of ostracism and ridicule that had triggered them to give consent for the surgery. Rebecca’s experience can be understood in the light of the most important of Foucault’s insights with regard to power, that it is more

effective when it is hidden from view. In other words, although knowledge, medicine and technologies are being used to control and regulate individuals and populations, the official version of things is that they are working in our interests and taking care of us for our own good.

Down the ages, intersex has been denied existence by doctors who have attempted to ‘normalize’ intersex infants at birth. Their genitals are mutilated and scarred; and this leads to adulthood trauma as well as severely impaired or absent erotic sensation. Though True Hermaphroditism has been documented down the ages, the condition has been clouded in stigma, disgust and more or less treated as a freak condition. After Rebecca’s mother confesses the truth to her and asks her what is wrong with being a girl, Rebecca replies, “I’ve never had an orgasm with a man or a woman. My clitoris was cut off!”. Rebecca’s body is actually harmed and mutilated with no possibilities of repair or healing. This means that Intersex Genital Mutilation is certainly a barbaric process that does no good but only harm. But this fact is unknown to the parents of intersex children and unacknowledged by most medical doctors. Intersexuality has been pushed behind layers of secrecy and stigma, preventing the matter from being discussed and understood authentically.

Before Rebecca understands the truth of her biological past, she encounters an intersex child named Morgan at the house of an acquaintance. When she sees Morgan who appears to be a girl standing up and urinating like a little boy, she is taken aback and perplexed. She asks about this to Morgan’s mom who explains that genetically Morgan has XY chromosomes. When Morgan reaches puberty, she could develop breasts, her hips could widen and she may look like a girl; or she could grow a beard, her shoulders may widen and she would look like a boy. She could also end up exhibiting a mixture of both characteristics. Rebecca is overwhelmed by this knowledge and asks whether Morgan gets teased by other kids. Morgan’s mom gives a very calm reply:

They would make as much fun of her if she was short, tall, fat, thin, cross-eyed or if her one arm was longer than the other or if her nose is too big. There is nothing you can do about it. Sooner or later we all have to deal with other people's stupidity. And its better that they make fun of something that she or he really is than something she or he isn't or ever will be. Morgan's mother definitely has a deeper understanding about the mainstream society's aversion towards anything or anyone that does not fit into the four concrete walls of heteronormativity.

Biomedicine acts as the most (socially and institutionally) privileged knowledge of the body. We live in a time and age where most of the people go along with the judgements of doctors in regulating and controlling their bodies. Nobody dares to rethink or refute these judgements. The role of the 'medical gaze' has played a significant role in the field of health. In works such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault discusses the ways in which medical patients have been subjected to an institutionally validated gaze that monitors their every move. Doctors and surgeons embody this institutional gaze as they carry out their work of evaluating their patients in terms of their bodies and behaviours. The human body thereby becomes a target for manipulation.

All their lives Intersex persons are blatantly denied information about their own bodies and are met with secrecy and silence about their condition. Here again one cannot help but remember Foucault's opinion about how 'power' successfully penetrates the society: "... power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates...". Foucault argues that nation states, police, government, legal practices, human sciences and medical institutions have their own rationale, cause and effects, strategies and mechanisms that have managed successfully in the past to obscure their workings by hiding behind observation and scrutiny.

The modern totalitarian institutions of the society, according to Giorgio Agamben, "allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories

of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system”. It is important to remember the surgeon’s assertion to Rebecca that the doctors “just fixed a mistake” by mutilating her genitals and reconstructing her gender identity. The truth about her body was buried under secrecy and denial. When Intersex Genital Mutilation is performed on intersexed infants, their bodies and identities are transformed and damaged in irreparable ways. Intersexed bodies are regarded as threats that disrupt the natural order and trouble our collective cultural norms. Medical science has always insisted upon erasing intersexuality from existence. Since the state finds it difficult to assimilate intersexed human beings into the political order, it strives to deny their physical existence and alter the biological truth of their bodies thus rendering them as ‘docile’ bodies; this culminates in a negation of their biological, sexual and political identity.

This analysis found out how intersexed bodies in the contemporary age have been rendered as “docile bodies that are subjected, used, transformed and improved” without their knowledge and consent. These bodies have been disciplined, subjugated and negated. The biological existence of intersexuality has been nullified by the non consensual invasive sex reassignment surgeries as well as hormonal interventions performed on intersex infants and children. Their bodies have been manipulated and violated irreparably by medical science. Intersex individuals have been treated with lies, duplicity and misinformation about their own bodies and this has resulted in physical debilitation, emotional trauma and isolation.

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